

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on January 9, 2021

RENEWING OUR BAPTISM

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Luke 3:21-22

Today we continue our series on the core stories associated with the life of Jesus. The Baptism of Jesus is one of the central narratives in the New Testament. It is found in all four Gospels. Remember Mark and John do not tell the story of Christmas. They begin their story of Jesus' earthly life with his baptism by John at the Jordan River.

Jesus' cousin John had been traveling around preaching for some time. He called people to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins. We are told that Jesus went to the river to receive baptism from John. When we think about this for a few moments it can be problematic. Why did Jesus, who was without sin, need to be baptized by John. I think the answer is that Jesus deepens the meaning of baptism. Jesus transforms everything he encounters. Baptism does not have just one meaning. The sacraments have deep symbolic significance. Baptism and the Lord's Supper through signs, symbols and actions speak to us of God's grace at levels that are almost too deep for words.

This morning I would like us to focus on three meanings of baptism. The Sacrament of Baptism reminds us of several ways that God's grace can be at work in our lives.

One meaning of baptism is decision. In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus came to the river to be baptized by John. This was a moment of decision for Jesus. Jesus had spent his childhood in Nazareth. He had grown up learning a trade in Joseph's carpenter shop. He had learned about God from the local Rabbi. Jesus had been a good son who helped care for his mother after Joseph's death. Jesus must have felt God's call upon his life for a long time. He was now about thirty years old; he knew the time was coming to begin his real life's work. He may have waited for a sign. The emergence of John the Baptist was the sign. It was time for him to act. So, Jesus came to John at the water. It was a time to make a public decision to follow God's will for his life.

For us, baptism is also a public sign that we have committed ourselves to follow Jesus. Since at least the third century, the church has baptized in two ways. One way has been to baptize infants. This is still most common today. When a child is baptized it is his or her parents who make a commitment. They commit themselves to raise the child in the faith. This act of baptism is not complete until confirmation. Confirmation developed as a result of infant baptism. It is a time when individuals who have been baptized as infants confirm their baptism by declaring their own decision to accept Jesus as Lord.

When an adult is baptized the decision for grace is clear. The person stands before the congregation and answers the questions of faith for themselves. They are saying yes to Jesus. They stand before the congregation in the same way Jesus stood before John, and commit themselves to God.

At various times in our lives we are presented with choices. We must decide either for God's will or against God's purpose for our lives. We continually reset our priorities. In baptism we commit ourselves to follow Jesus.

Ben Wadon reminds us of this meaning of baptism with the words of this anthem. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God".

A second meaning of baptism is being marked as a beloved child of God.

Following his baptism by John, a voice came from heaven and said, "**You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.**" When we are baptized we are called God's beloved.

In our service of baptism there is an option of anointing – taking oil and making a sign of the cross on the person's forehead saying, "child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

One explanation for the origin of anointing is from a practice of shepherds. Lice and other insects would often get into the wool of sheep, and when they got near the sheep's head, they could burrow into the sheep's ears and kill the sheep. So, ancient shepherds poured oil on the sheep's head. This made the wool slippery, making it impossible for insects to get near the sheep's ears because the insects would slide off. From this, anointing became symbolic of blessing, protection, and empowerment.

Through the Reformation, anointing was lost for centuries to Protestants. But 40 years ago, after the reunion of the Southern and Northern Presbyterian Churches, it was returned to our worship book. And although it is optional, the anointing is a meaningful part of the sacrament of baptism.

Signed Sealed, Delivered, I'm Yours sang Stevie Wonder. That's our song, too. In baptism, we are delivered from the old life into a new life in Christ. We bear an invisible sign of our belovedness which we may cling to when we are frightened or despairing.

For me, the anointing reminds me that when I feel disheartened about the church or doubting in my faith or disappointed in myself I remember... I have been claimed by Christ and marked as his forever. And so are you. The joyous truth of our baptism is that we do "belong – body and soul, in life and in death- not to ourselves, but to our faithful Savior, Jesus, the Christ."

Jim reminds us of this truth in the Anthem "You Are Mine."

A third meaning of baptism is as spiritual refreshment. Most living things need water to grow and thrive.

You may recall the woman that Jesus met at the well. She was drawing water for the use of her family. Jesus talks to her of living water. Jesus said to her **Everyone who drinks**

of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of this water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

Jesus is speaking of his presence and love that feeds our very souls. Jeremiah tells us that human beings are like cisterns that have a crack in them. These cisterns cannot hold water. No matter how much water is poured in them they will never be full. Jeremiah is telling us that human beings are the same. No matter how much we have, no matter how many experiences we enjoy, no matter how much power we obtain, no matter our position in society, we will never be fully whole. There is at the very core of the human spirit a need for the love of God. This thirst at the center of our being can only be quenched by the presence of God.

Jesus offers us his very self. The water of baptism reminds us of our need for prayer and worship and scripture that help to mediate God's presence to us. A mere belief in God is not enough – we need the active presence of his love in the heart of our being. We need to open our minds and hearts to his coming.

Our choir reminds of this truth of the waters of grace in the following anthem, "All Who Thirst".

Now we come to the part of this service that calls for us to respond. For those who would like, we are not going to force anyone, you will be invited to move to a station in the front of the Sanctuary to privately renew your baptism and reclaim the promises that God has given in the sacrament. As we gather in this Sanctuary today we come from different places with different needs. Thus, we have provided different ways for you to respond.

Some of us today come having taken our faith in Jesus for granted. We have been part of the Christian Church for years. Yet the importance of your commitment has diminished. Maybe you never have fully said yes to God. We invite you to come to the font and place a stone in the water as a sign of your renewed commitment.

Others of us come today feeling unloved or unwanted. You can come to the station to be anointed reminding you that you have been claimed by Jesus.

Others come to worship today as you regularly have come in the past, yet God may not seem real to you. There is a sense of dryness in your life. God may seem so remote. You desire to know Christ more fully. Come to this fountain and take a glass of water as a sign of your commitment to pray, or read Scripture seeking the very face of God.

The choir will now begin to sing "You Belong to Christ". Please join in singing, and if you desire come down the center aisle to one of the stations to renew your baptism privately; then return to your pew by the side aisle.